



Winterbach's *Spyt* and Scholtz's production: An expression of a postmodern impasse

Lida Krüger

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Some scholars have declared metamodernism to be postmodernism's successor, and Afrikaans novelist Ingrid Winterbach's work has been argued to be an example of this distinct move away from the postmodern paradigm. However, in this article I present the alternative interpretation that Winterbach's play, *Spyt* (Regret), rather represents postmodernism's inability to give way to its successor. An investigation from a postmodern perspective leads me to conclude that, in both the text and performance of this play (directed by Brink Scholtz), an escape from the postmodern paradigm entails the end of all representation. Winterbach reduces all of the characters' endeavours to surfaces which become parodies. All their experiences are commodified and any attempt at uncovering a deeper meaning to life is undermined by ridicule. Winterbach furthermore draws attention to some of her characters' limited vocabulary and reliance on English loanwords. This culminates in a powerful scene where the loanword 'awesome' is repeated to the extent that it becomes simultaneously meaningless and indispensable; a tension that she does not resolve. In addition, the crossing of the boundary between life and death, which has been described as postmodernism's final frontier, is portrayed by relying on an obsolete narrative. The play therefore suggests a postmodern impasse, rather than a move towards a new paradigm. **Keywords:** Brink Scholtz, Ingrid Winterbach, metamodernism, postmodernism, *Spyt*, surfaces.

Introduction


Afrikaans novelist Ingrid Winterbach's oeuvre has been read as a clear deviation from the postmodern paradigm (Van der Merwe 95; Human 9). Her characters' search for meaning and the juxtaposition of the scientific and the spiritual in her trilogy *Die boek van toeval en toeverlaat* (*The Book of Happenstance*), *Die benederyk* (*The Road of Excess*), and *Die aanspraak van lewende wesens* (*It Might Get Loud*) are interpreted by Van der Merwe (95) and Human (9) as a return to the possibility of a deeper meaning. In this article, I present an alternative reading of Winterbach's work, arguing that in her play, *Spyt* (Regret), she uses affect and borrows elements from ancient Greek mythology, the Baroque era, and contemporary science, not in an attempt to move away from postmodernism but rather to dramatize postmodernism's inability to give way to its successor. This is done through a proliferation of surfaces and excess (especially in the language use of the characters), a preoccupation with death, and the aesthetic choices in the play's representation of death.

These aspects of the play find expression in both the written text as well as its first performance in Potchefstroom at the Aardklop National Arts Festival of 2010, which was directed by Brink Scholtz. While I regard Scholtz' interpretation of *Spyt* as faithful to the written text, the performance emphasized the aspects of the play that I analyse below. For this reason, as well as the fact that a drama text is necessarily incomplete until performed, I consider both the written text and performance in my analysis.

In this article I situate Winterbach's oeuvre within current debates on the end of postmodernism, before providing a brief synopsis of *Spyt* and a discussion of the reception of its first performance. This is followed by an exploration of the tension between surface and depth and the use of excess and parody in the play. Thereafter I discuss the undermining of attempts at self-improvement and claims of access to a deeper meaning, before moving on to an investigation of the meaninglessness of language and the representation of death.

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Postmodernism's demise and Winterbach's oeuvre

Postmodernism's demise had been announced decades ago by, among others, one of its most prominent scholars, Linda Hutcheon. In the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, she states that the "postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on—as do those of modernism—in our contemporary twenty-first century world" (181). Hutcheon then invites her readers to find a new label to chart the cultural changes and continuities that succeeds postmodernism (181).

This is, in fact, what Vermeulen and Van den Akker aim to do in their article "Notes on Metamodernism", where they argue that postmodernism has been replaced by a new "structure of feeling" which entails a return to myth, hope, and engagement. Building on this research, Van der Merwe (95) argues that various post-millennial literary works from different parts of the world are examples of metamodernist works. Although none of Winterbach's works are the primary texts of Van der Merwe's study, he identifies the presence of both the scientific and the spiritual in *The Book of Happenstance* as metamodern (95).

Also, Human (9) interprets Winterbach's works, in particular the above-mentioned trilogy, as a definite marker of a paradigm shift away from postmodernism. Despite his identification of the blurring of genre boundaries, the use of pastiche, cynicism, semiotic games, and the relationality of meaning and knowledge in *It Might Get Loud*, Human argues that Winterbach's work clearly shows that postmodernism's days as dominating cultural paradigm are numbered (9).

Human sees a renewed interest in master narratives and transcendence, the rediscovery of relationality and love, the reappraisal of authenticity and artistry, and the body as origin and eventual remnant as the signs of the new cultural paradigm. In addition, he interprets the characters in *It Might Get Loud*'s faith and longing for that which is meaningful, true, and pure as confirmation of his argument (9), despite the fact that they do not necessarily find the answers and solutions that they search for so zealously.

These scholars therefore see the *search for or interest in* the things that postmodernism questions, such as authenticity, the spiritual, master narratives, and other related concepts, as indicative of the new paradigm. This would entail that postmodernism is seen as exclusively rational, unfeeling, cynical, a-religious, and by implication restricted and stable. In *Spyt*, however, Winterbach uses the same concepts and themes as in her trilogy, in a manner that I interpret as decidedly postmodern.

Spyt: Winterbach's text and Scholtz's production

Spyt shows the audience the last day in the life of Braam, a successful businessman and art investor whose life is characterized by luxury and decadence. His death is hinted at from the first scene of the play, which, as the stage directions indicate, is a tableau vivant resembling Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*. As if aware that he will die soon, Braam acts in an odd manner throughout the rest of the play, disconnected from his environment and the people close to him. His behaviour also seems to be out of character, as his wife, best friend, and two of his mistresses observe repeatedly. Throughout the play, Braam, his wife, Mariana, and two of his mistresses receive threatening phone calls from one of his former employees, who warns that Braam will die on that particular day. Braam's day consists of having breakfast with his wife, going to the gym with his friend, Frans, and meeting his three mistresses, the last one being Frans's wife, Jolene. A stranger, Moira Jean, approaches him and asks if his metaphorical slate is clean, again hinting at his imminent death. Braam is then violently kidnapped by two men wearing masks, but this incident proves to be a red herring: the abduction is arranged by Frans, who discovered Braam's affair with Jolene and wanted to warn and scare him. The two reconcile and go out for a drink. Braam returns home before going out again to meet up with the threatening caller, who then shoots him. In the last scene, Braam is rowed across a body of water while reminiscing about the meaning of his father's life and his love of nature.

The text clearly juxtaposes seemingly irreconcilable things, like a life of excess and superficiality, with a consideration of conscience. Mythological and Baroque elements are juxtaposed with a contemporary preoccupation with surfaces. While the text and production received critical recognition, its depiction of excess seemed to baffle and offend the audience of its first performance.

Spyt premiered in 2010 at the Aardklop National Arts Festival. In her review for the festival paper, *Spat*, Deborah Steinmair (8) finds it a pity that the production of *Spyt* did not live up to its promising text. Nevertheless, the play won the FynGoud prize for the best production. Unfortunately, most of the general reaction that *Spyt*

elicited centred on two sex scenes, which many audience members found offensive and excessive. Johannes de Villiers (3) observes that it was specifically the interracial sex scene between Braam (Stian Bam) and his second mistress (Ntombi Makutshi) which prompted more or less twelve audience members to leave the auditorium in protest during the performance of 29 September 2010.

In a blog post on *versindaba.co.za*, poet and sociologist Andries Bezuidenhout laments the fact that so many audience members fixate on the sex scenes, while completely missing the more profound significance of the text. He states:

I see *Spyt* as a play that (among other things) is about excess—times when pleasure becomes a commodity, but when people lose the ability to express meaning in language. Excess and superficialization. One scene, where two characters discuss the art of a young black artist as a good investment while having wild sex, in various positions, comically, as in pornographic films, also makes this point. The characters are constantly busy with their bodies—in the gym and on the bed. The sex scenes are comical, or sad throughout, but at one particular moment potentially beautiful—as when an artist traces the outlines of the main character on a huge piece of paper (exactly the point where many people left). (my translation)

The potentially beautiful moment that Bezuidenhout refers to is, of course, the interracial sex scene. Bezuidenhout's reaction highlights the irony of the audience members fixating on the sex scenes, seeing the play as cheap and superficial, while missing the point that Winterbach and Scholtz make about cheapness and superficiality. In *Spyt*, as in many of her other works, Winterbach focuses on death, mortality, and its meaning, sometimes ruminating on the possibility of a spiritual world. However, the question remains whether her engagement with these themes can be seen as postmodern or not.

Tension between surface and depth

Postmodernism, according to Barry (84–5), revels in both excess and surfaces. In contrast to modernism, which advocates for minimalism, postmodernism embraces excess, gaudiness, and a mix of qualities (84). Postmodernism often entails bizarre “mixtures of imagery, viewpoint, and vocabulary” which “jostle on a surface which seems happy to be nothing *but* surface” (85, emphasis in original). It is furthermore, according to Nigel Watson (56), also concerned with consumption rather than production.

Postmodernism also does not endeavour to abandon metanarratives, but, according to McHale (24), to reduce them to “little narratives”. McHale therefore regards postmodernism's collapse of hierarchies as a myth (226). Without hierarchies, the juxtaposition of the incongruous, which is so closely associated with postmodernism, would not be possible. Postmodernism merely juxtaposes “disparate discursive orders” without “any attempt to reduce them to a common order” (226). Importantly, Hutcheon (1–2) argues that postmodernism's defining characteristic lies in its “commitment to doubleness, or duplicity”. According to her, postmodernism installs and reinforces as much as it undermines and subverts (1–2).

It is from this postmodern theoretical vantage point that I interpret the familiar themes found in Winterbach's novelistic oeuvre as they appear in the text and performance of *Spyt*. Scholtz (8) suggests that the play works with meaning in an open way, which was very exciting but difficult for her to work with. In a manner reminiscent of Umberto Eco's claim that, although meaning is fluid, not every interpretation is valid (*Interpretation and Overinterpretation* 24), Scholtz explains that in *Spyt*, there is

an incredible amount of room for interpretation, but at the same time you cannot tack an interpretation onto the text. [...] There is for example a type of juxtaposition between, on the one hand a worldview wherein things are arbitrary and meaningless and accidental and episodic and so on, and then there is almost on another level a very metaphysical, a very clear meaning. Yes, a metaphysical process. Almost literally that there is a reality beyond. It is a strange tension. I think it is always there in Winterbach's writing. (Scholtz 8, my translation)

Scholtz therefore interprets the text as ambiguous regarding an absolute truth, on the one hand suggesting that there is a reality beyond the present world, and on the other revelling in arbitrary meaninglessness, without any attempts to reconcile this ambiguity.

Excessive sex scenes and parodies of pornography

The meaninglessness, excess, and surface-driven aspects of the play are most obvious in the first sex scene, as suggested by Bezuidenhout above. The scene starts with Braam knocking on his first mistress's door. As soon as she opens, they immediately start having sex while she tries to discuss a possible investment in the work of a young, upcoming black artist, Lesego Motlau, while he tries to focus on the sex:

SY. Jy maak dit vanoggend vir my baie moeilik. Ek weet nie wat de hel dit met jou is nie—jou aandag was nog geen oomblik by ons gesprek nie.

BRAAM. O nee, jy maak 'n fout—my aandag is hier, presies hier met jou! (Fluister.) Is daar 'n posisie wat jy dalk nóg lekkerder vind?

SY. Braam—jy maak dit nie vir my maklik nie! Ek het moeite gedoen met die Lesego Motlau! Ek het werk te koop gekry wat nie eintlik te koop was nie!

SHE. You are making it very difficult for me. I don't know what the hell it is with you—your attention has not for a moment been with our conversation.

BRAAM. O no, you are making a mistake—my attention is here, exactly here with you! (Whispers.) Is there a position that you maybe find even nicer?

SHE. Braam—you are not making it easy for me! I made an effort with this Lesego Motlau! I got work for sale that wasn't actually for sale! (emphasis in original).

When she later mentions the use of blood as medium in Motlau's work, Braam launches into a technical, scientific explanation of why blood is red, while plants are green:

In 'n chlorofiel-molekule [sic] is daar 136 verskillende atome, gerangskik om 'n magnesium-atoom in die middel. Vervang hierdie magnesium-atoom met 'n yster-atoom, en jy kry 'n hemoglobien-molekule. Die yster-atoom kombineer met die ander atome om bloed rooi te maak.

In a chlorophyll molecule there are 136 different atoms, positioned around a magnesium atom in the centre. Replace this magnesium atom with an iron atom, and you get a haemoglobin molecule. The iron atom combines with the other atoms to make blood red.

These characters are having sex and discussing art and science, acts which, separately, might point to a connection between them, or an interest in a profound intellectual pursuit, but together become incongruent. The scene is described in the didascalia as follows:

Terwyl hulle praat het hulle deurgaans seks, in allerlei denkbare posisies—op die vloer, op die bed.

While they talk they have sex throughout the scene, in all kinds of conceivable positions—on the floor, on the bed.

Her cell phone rings twice, and she answers without interrupting the sex. As Bezuidenhout points out, the depiction of sex in this scene therefore becomes a parody of pornography. This idea is furthermore underscored by the fact that Braam has not one but three mistresses, “een wit, een swart, en een die vrou van 'n goeie vriend van my” (one white, one black, and one the wife of a good friend of mine), as he describes them, and that he visits them all before lunch on the same day. These sex scenes do not indicate engagement but, rather, a surface of pornographic representation.

In addition, both characters seem less interested in Motlau's art than in the return they could get on their investment in his work. It is even suggested that they are in the business of exploiting young, upcoming artists when Braam's mistress describes Motlau's work and its possibilities as follows:

Lúister: hy's pas uit die township, sonder enige of baie min opleiding, en hy maak hierdie ongelooflike gesofistikeerde werk!

Listen: he is just out of the township, without any or with very little training, and he makes this incredibly sophisticated work! (emphasis in original).

When Braam seems uninterested, she says,

Jy begryp waarom ons nou moet koop, nê? Hierdie man, hierdie jong man—meneer Christo reken dis nou 'n goeie tyd om sy werk te koop, voor hy die internasionale oog vang, en hy het spesiaal gereël dat ons ...

You realize why we have to buy now, right? This man, this young man—Mr Christo reckons it is a good time to buy now, before he catches the international eye, and he arranged especially for us to ...

Her interest in Motlau's work therefore centres on the fact that he is black and has not received much training. The assumption is that he would sell his work for less than it is worth. In addition, his disadvantaged background only makes him more appealing to a politically correct European market. Motlau's work is therefore reduced to its value as a commodity to be consumed by an international market. Just as the sex between Braam and his mistress becomes a parodic surface, their interest in art is reduced to a banal conversation about a commodity.

Capitalist icons and the quest for self-improvement

Apart from the bedrooms of Braam's mistresses, the gym is an additional space where the focus is on his body, as Bezuidenhout points out. In the third scene of the play, Braam and his friend, Frans, are in the gym, sitting side by side on rowing apparatus. The didascalia describes the action as follows: "*Hulle roei onophoudelik tydens die gesprek. Albei is in pakke geklee*" (They row non-stop during the conversation. Both are dressed in suits). This ludicrous representation firstly mirrors the sex scene discussed above, where there is also a frantic physical action which accompanies the dialogue. Secondly, the fact that they are wearing suits in the gym parodies the suit-clad capitalist figures of the 1980s and 1990s. Thirdly, the rowing apparatus foreshadows the rowboat in which Braam finds himself in the last scene of the play.

The ridiculousness of the two men using gym apparatus while wearing suits also reduces this image to a mere surface, and the men's conversation suggests further superficiality. Frans and Braam discuss a rugby game that they will attend the coming Saturday. Frans mentions that he has organised two sex workers, who are apparently twins, as entertainment for him and Braam after the game. Frans then shares with Braam that he is worried about his prostate. Braam reacts unsympathetically, and Frans is offended. Braam apologizes:

BRAAM. Jammer. Maar daar is nog altyd die vooruitsig van Saterdagagaand—wanneer ons die tweeling gaan laat les opsê.

FRANS. Yip! So praat 'n bek, Braam, so praat 'n bek!

BRAAM. Die tweeling met hulle identiese, blonde, bonsende tiete.

FRANS. Jirre Braam, hoe lus maak jy my nou!

BRAAM. 'n Oog vir 'n oog en 'n tiet vir 'n tiet.

FRANS. Wat ook al, Braam. Maar jy moet onthou dit het moeite gekos om die girls in die hande te kry. En hulle is nie goedkoop nie.

BRAAM. Ek sal betaal! Ek sal betaal wat hulle vra! Vir 'n nag se ongebreidelde rinkinkery betaal ek wat ook al die prys is.

FRANS. Dit sal nie goedkoop wees nie maar dit sal elke sent werd wees, my vriend.

BRAAM. Sorry. But there is always the prospect of Saturday night—when we are going to teach the twins a lesson.

FRANS. Yip! You can say that again, Braam, you can say that again!

BRAAM. The twins with their identical, blonde, bouncing tits.

FRANS. Lord Braam, how you are whetting my appetite now!

BRAAM. An eye for an eye and a tit for a tit.

FRANS. Whatever, Braam. But you should remember that it took effort to get hold of the girls. And they are not cheap.

BRAAM. I'll pay! I'll pay what they are asking! For a night's unbridled gallivanting I'll pay whatever the price.

FRANS. It won't be cheap, but it will be worth every cent, my friend.

The scene ends with Frans sharing his concern that his wife might be cheating on him. It is therefore clear that sex also functions as a commodifiable service in this scene. While Frans does have deeper concerns, such as his health and the fidelity of his wife, he chooses to distract himself from these anxieties with the services of a pair of blonde twins: sex workers with large breasts. The level to which the twins serve as a commodity to fulfil a male fantasy becomes preposterous as they are later described as having bouncing breasts like balloons, udders, or teats. Again, the text represents sex as a surface, a parody of clichéd pornographic images.

However, it is not only the sex lives of these two men that are represented as a superficial commodity. Braam and his wife, Mariana, have an argument in which he tells her that she under-utilizes her abilities. When Mariana sees Braam again at the end of the day, she tells him about her plans to enrich and develop herself. However, these plans also become laughable. Mariana describes them as follows:

Ek wil die nuwe jaar 'n nuwe blaadjie omslaan. Ek het 'n hele program uitgewerk. Ek het myself laat gaan die afgelope paar jaar. Ek het net op oppervlakkige dinge gefokus. Ek gaan inskryf vir een of ander kursus. Miskien Kunsgeskiedenis. Miskien Argeologie. Miskien Remediërende Onderwys. Ek wil ook 'n kookkursus doen. Iets soos Indonesiese kookkuns. Leandré het dit gedoen. Sy sê dis awesome.

I want to turn a new leaf this year. I worked out an entire program. I let myself go these past few years. I only focused on superficial things. I am going to enrol in some or other course. Maybe Art History. Maybe Archaeology. Maybe Remedial Education. I also want to do a cooking class. Something like Indonesian cooking. Leandré did it. She says it's awesome.

Mariana continues to describe a course that a couple that she knows completed. This course supposedly helps a person to connect with their true inner self. The couple that Mariana knows allegedly benefited from the course in such a degree that their relationship is strengthened; they are, in fact, planning ambitious projects, like converting their Wendy house into a summer house.

Mariana's desire for self-improvement may be sincere, but it is anything but focused. She simply wants to enrich her life; the way in which is seemingly of no importance to her, be it Art History, Archaeology, Education, a cooking class, or pop psychology. The courses that she is interested in promise unrealistic radical changes in people's personal lives, as if an emotional miracle cure. By focusing only on these courses, which seem to be packaged and sold to stereotypically bored, middleclass housewives, Mariana's search for a deeper meaning to her life also becomes a potential act of consumption, rather than production.

A playboy bunny and a psychotic gunman

While Braam, Frans, and Mariana seem to be stuck in an existence of excess, superficiality, and surfaces, there are two characters who are concerned with a deeper meaning, as Scholtz (8) suggests. After Braam's visit to his third mistress, he goes to a park. Here he is confronted with Moira Jean, a woman who asks him if his proverbial slate is clean. He evades her questions, but he does ask her how he could clean his slate. The stage directions indicate that she takes a tape deck from her handbag and they dance energetically to Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff". After the dance, Moira Jean explains that this was only the warmup:

MOIRA JEAN. Okay. Nou's ons opgewarm. Ek wil jou weer vra, meneer, is jy gereed?

BRAAM. Gereed waarvoor?

MOIRA JEAN. Vir die afrekening.

BRAAM. Watter afrekening?

MOIRA JEAN. Die opweeg en die afweeg.

BRAAM. Waarvan?

MOIRA JEAN. Meneer, jy hou jou verniet onnosel. Jy weet goed wat opgeweeg en afgeweeg word.

BRAAM. Ek glo nie in daardie soort afrekening nie. Ek het eintlik nie tyd vir enige van jou praatjies nie. Hoe aanvallig jy ook al is.

MOIRA JEAN. Okay. Now we're warmed up. I want to ask you again, mister, are you ready?

BRAAM. Ready for what?

MOIRA JEAN. For the reckoning.

BRAAM. What reckoning?

MOIRA JEAN. The weighing off.

BRAAM. Of what?

MOIRA JEAN. Mister, you are playing dumb in vain. You know very well what is being weighed.

BRAAM. I don't believe in that sort of reckoning. I don't really have time for any of your chats. Charming as you may be.

Halfway through a play that has up to this point been depicting characters who busy themselves with meaningless pursuits, the audience, and Braam, are confronted with Moira Jean, a character who believes in eternal life and that our actions in this life have consequences in the next. It might seem that Moira Jean functions as Braam's conscience, as the voice of reason that might bring him to repentance for his selfishness and callousness.

This idea is, however, undermined, not only by their bizarre dance to "Hot Stuff" but also by Moira Jean's name and appearance, although the latter differs between text and performance. Her name, which sounds suspiciously similar to Marilyn Monroe's original name, Norma Jeanne Mortenson, suggests that she might be giving Braam a false name, which already makes it hard to take her seriously. The didascalia describes her as follows: "Sy dra 'n kort rokkie, laehals-toppie en iets soos bunny ore" (She is wearing a short skirt, low cut top and something like bunny

ears). Moira Jean is therefore presented as a parody of a sex symbol. In the performance, Moira Jean (Lulu Botha) was clad in a tracksuit. Botha portrayed the character as an intrusive, over-familiar stranger, thereby discrediting her in a different way. Nevertheless, the only thing about her that interests Braam is the possibility of having sex with her, as is clear when he tells her: “*Juffrou, ek het ’n beter idee. Jy kom saam met my. Ons soek ’n hotel. Ons vergeet voorlopig van hierdie onsinnige praatjies*” (Miss, I have a better idea. You come with me. We look for a hotel. We forget for now about this nonsensical talk).

The other character concerned with a deeper meaning to life is Micky, the man who has been stalking, and eventually shoots, Braam. He seems to be in contact with an alternate reality. After numerous threatening phone calls throughout the play, Micky appears for the first time in the penultimate scene, when Braam finally confronts him face to face. It quickly becomes clear that Micky is in conversation with a cast of voices, loosely based on common archetypes. Micky tells Braam that he has received instruction to kill him from the Centurion and that the Centurion gives the orders and does not make mistakes. Yet, among Micky’s cast of characters, there is also the Whore. Micky describes her as “*die moeder van die hoere en die gruwels van die aarde*” (the mother of the whores and the horrors of the earth). The Whore apparently says “*lelike, godslasterlike dinge*” (nasty, blasphemous things) and Micky says that she is “*baie, baie, baie onrein*” (very, very, very unclean). The Whore seems to be the only figure who can challenge the Centurion, and as Braam gets this information from Micky, he tries to use it to dissuade Micky from killing him.

However, Micky is represented as mentally unstable. In this scene, he is described by the didascalia as “*baie gespanne en na aan histeries*” (very tense and almost hysterical), and he starts to cry midway through their confrontation. During one of the scenes where Braam speaks to him over the phone, he asks if Micky has been taking his medication. Braam also placates Micky during these phone calls with words such as: “*Nee. Ek dink nie jy’s vlermuiskak of hondestront nie*” (No. I don’t think you’re bat shit or dog dung), and “*Nee. Ek dink nie jy’s ’n drol en ’n freak nie*” (No. I don’t think you are a turd and a freak), suggesting that Micky has been voicing his insecurities to Braam. The audience is therefore unlikely to take Micky seriously.

While Winterbach and Scholtz therefore do juxtapose excess, surfaces, and meaninglessness with concerns about a deeper meaning to life, these concerns are undermined. In the end Moira Jean’s and Micky’s viewpoints are represented as no less ridiculous than Braam’s parodic sex life or Mariana’s consumerist attempts at self-improvement.

The meaninglessness of language

The importance of excess and surfaces in *Spyt* takes on an additional significance when the characters’ use of language is considered. Within postmodernism, attention is often drawn to language for its own sake. Jacques Derrida argues that the link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and contends that a supposedly fixed concept behind a word does not exist (qtd in Zima 142). Bert States (25) points out that a sign must be repeated to be of value, and that “the inclination of the sign is to become more efficient, to be read easily”. However, to be “read easily” does not cement the link between meaning and sign. Derrida argues that repetition shifts the meaning of a word or expression, rather than strengthening its precise meaning (qtd in Zima 151). Since the precise context of each utterance cannot be repeated, the exact repetition of a word or expression is not actually possible. The contextual shift of every repetition changes the meaning of the word. Therefore, repetition leads to disintegration, rather than a consolidation of meaning.

Furthermore, a word, expression, or symbol can not only shift in meaning, but become meaningless, as Eco explains when he states that “the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it hardly has any meaning left” (*Postscript to The Name of the Rose* 3). Postmodernism therefore aims to detach words from their meanings, to draw attention to language itself, how we use it, and how we are implicit in its use.

In *Spyt*, the use of language achieves these postmodernist aims: the play draws attention to the words themselves, detaching them from their accepted meaning in certain cases. Braam’s dissatisfaction with his environment and life also includes a pedantic preoccupation with the precise meaning of words. In the scene where Braam and Frans discuss their planned evening with the blonde sex workers, for example, the following exchange happens:

FRANS. *Ons gaan rinkink my vriend, ons gaan—*

[...]

BRAAM. *Wat beteken rinkink, Frans? Wat is na jou mening die presiese betekenis van rinkink?*

FRANS. *Wat de fok gaan met jōu aan?*

BRAAM. *En somer die etimologie van die woord rinkink ook?*

FRANS. *Jy's nou moedswillig my ou.*

FRANS. We are going to rollick, my friend we are—

[...]

BRAAM. What does rollick mean, Frans? What is, in your opinion the *exact* meaning of rollick?

FRANS. What the fuck is wrong with you?

BRAAM. While you're about it, also the etymology of the word rollick.

FRANS. You're wanton, my mate (emphasis in original).

By portraying Braam's concern with language as unusual, Winterbach draws attention to the fact that these characters use language without considering the words themselves, taking their meaning for granted. These exchanges also lay the groundwork for the ninth scene of the play, in which the English loanword 'awesome' is used repeatedly. In this scene, Braam and Frans are sitting in a bar, having their reconciliatory drink. According to the didascalia, the rest of the cast stand in a row at the back of the stage, doing disco dance moves while standing in one place. The text indicates that snippets from the conversations around Braam and Frans are heard through a voice over:

Karate Kallie. Daar's hierdie een toneel.

Man.

Dit was awesome.

Ja, Karate Kallie is great. Hy's die beste. Hy's awesome.

Ons het peanuts geëet.

Awesome. Dit was 'n awesome aand.

Awesome.

Alles is awesome.

Karate Kallie is awesome.

Wildlife is awesome.

2010 is awesome.

Awesome. Awesome. Awesome.

[...]

Probeer jy maar net jou bes, sê ek [vir my seun].

Jou heel heel beste.

Jou heel heel héél beste.

En moenie jou pen voor die tyd neersit nie.

Sê ek vir hom.

Jou heel awesome beste.

Awesome.

Aaaaw-some.

Aaaaaaaaaw-some.

Aaaaaa-sem.

Asem.

Aaaa-sem.

Karate Kallie. There's this one scene.¹
 Man.
 It was awesome.
 Yes, Karate Kallie is great. He's the best. He's awesome.
 We ate peanuts.
 Awesome. It was an awesome night.
 Awesome.
 Everything is awesome.
 Karate Kallie is awesome.
 Wildlife is awesome.
 2010 is awesome.
 Awesome. Awesome. Awesome.

[...]

You just try your best, I say [to my son].
 Your very very best.
 Your very very very best (emphasis in original).
 And don't lay down your pen before time is up.
 I say to him.
 Your very awesome best.
 Awesome.
 Aaaaaw-some.
 Aaaaaaaaaw-some.
 Aaaaaa-sem.
 Asem.
 Aaaa-sem.

Clearly, something happens during this scene in which the word “awesome” gradually becomes the word “*asem*”, Afrikaans for “breath”. This change is even more evident in performance, as the subtle shift in sound from “awesome” to “*asem*” is audible. Bezuidenhout describes the scene as follows:

A voice that was recorded beforehand, a father, tells about the rugby he saw with his son. [...] [T]he man does not have the vocabulary to describe how he enjoyed the rugby. All he can do is to repeat the word “awesome”. “Awesome” becomes a refrain standing in for the man’s inability to express himself in Afrikaans.

After the voiceover is heard, the cast walks downstage and, according to the didascalia, “*inkanteer stadig: a-sem, a-sem, a-sem*” (incantates slowly: *a-sem, a-sem, a-sem*). Bezuidenhout interprets the resulting effect as follows: “[The actors] repeat the word ‘awesome’. Its meaning changes, as they stop talking and only breathe. ‘Awesome’ becomes ‘asem’ [...]”. What is the difference between ‘awesome’ and ‘asem’?”

As Bezuidenhout observes, the word is used in so many contexts that it fails to denote anything specific. The word can now mean almost anything, as long as it carries a general, positive association. Its meaning is restricted to a vague, positive concept. Instead of a word, the sound is reduced to breath, to nothingness. In the production that I saw on 2 October 2010, the voice over created the effect of engulfing the audience in sound; the word “awesome” seems to become omnipresent, resulting in a strange sensory experience for the audience.

In the next scene, Braam’s wife uses the word “awesome” to describe her plans for self-improvement. In the script, he responds by asking: “Awesome?”, to which she replies: “*Jy weet, amazing*” (You know, amazing), incapable of defining the word without using another worn-out loanword. In the 2010 production, Braam lost his temper just as Mariana said the word “awesome”, suggesting that he, too, has been affected by the sensory overload in the preceding scene. The word’s changed meaning is thus underscored by Braam’s reaction.

Furthermore, the fact that Mariana uses one overused loanword to define another, instead of drawing from a richer Afrikaans vocabulary, as Bezuidenhout puts it, could also point to a degeneration, not only of the Afrikaans language but also culture. The banality of the content of this excerpt emphasizes a superficial white middle class experience that revolves around predictable slapstick comedies, vicariously living through your offspring, the

2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, and a tourist-like experience of the country that centres on wildlife, game parks, and beaches, mostly mediated through glossy magazines.

However, the tension between meaninglessness and meaning that Scholtz (8) refers to is present also in this scene. The word “breath” denotes the essence of life, something which Braam is about to lose. The word therefore refers at the same time to nothing as well as something as vital as life itself, which raises the question: what is the meaning of a life devoid of meaning? The word “awesome” therefore becomes heavy as attention is drawn to it. As a result, the word simultaneously becomes rich in meaning and devoid of meaning.

Representation of death

Winterbach and Scholtz, however, do not only ruminate on the meaning of life in *Spyt*, but as suggested from the tableau vivant in the very first scene, also on the meaning of death. According to Alice Rayner (30), death is the definitive ‘other’ for life. Also, according to McHale (261), death is the ultimate ontological boundary and therefore any ontologically-oriented poetics, such as postmodernism, are also preoccupied with death. As a result, the representation of death in a postmodern work points to a crisis of representation, because, as Rayner (30) argues, death can only guarantee the truth of its otherness and the absence of a substantive thing.

In this play, where there is an ontological tension between the possibilities of a life consisting of meaningless surfaces versus a deeper significance and eternal consequences behind these surfaces, death, as the ultimate ontological boundary, should resolve this tension. However, since death is the ultimate other, its representation can only be based on representations. This is most obvious in the first and last scenes of *Spyt*. From the first scene, which can be interpreted as Braam’s autopsy, the representation borrows from Baroque visual art in its resemblance to Rembrandt’s painting. This visual image is accompanied by a voiceover describing the anatomy of the heart as well as the consequences of different types of heart wounds in clinical terms, as indicated in the script. The biological consequence of Micky’s gunshot is therefore conveyed via a text resembling a contemporary medical textbook, as well as an artwork from Baroque times representing medical instruction.

The didascalia specifies that in *Spyt*’s last scene, Braam is seated in a rowboat with a silent boatman in a raincoat and red hat. Braam reminisces about his father’s life. The memory of his father, in his moderation, his appreciation of nature, and his single uncontrolled passion—his support for the Springbok rugby team—elicits a nostalgic response from Braam, who seems to contrast his father’s life with his own. When the boatman leaves the stage and the presumption is that they have reached their destination, Braam removes his clothes and stands in the shirt and underpants which he wore in the first scene of the play. He then leaves the stage and the play ends as Donna Summer’s “Hot Stuff” starts to play.

The representation of death in the final scene therefore borrows from Greek mythology. The assumption is that Braam is rowed across either the Styx or the Acheron rivers by the boatman, Charon. Both of these rivers are considered the boundary between the world of the living and the underworld, which the souls of the deceased have to cross with the help of Charon (Roberts; Leeming).

By falling back on this ancient narrative in her depiction of Braam’s death, Winterbach acknowledges the limits of the representation of death. All that is left is to leave the realm of representation, by leaving the stage. The stage therefore represents the world of the living, and the only way to exit from this world, is to exit from its representation. Interpreted in this way, *Spyt* seems to suggest that the only escape from the aesthetic impasse that postmodernism leaves us in, is crossing the final frontier, which is death. However, we are unable to represent this without resorting to obsolete myths and images from bygone times.

Conclusion

Spyt engages many of the themes that Winterbach’s work has been known for. While these themes have been interpreted as marking a distinct shift away from a postmodern paradigm, I consider in this article if the search for meaning and juxtaposition of the scientific and spiritual do not serve a postmodern purpose in the play.

Firstly, all of the characters’ endeavours are reduced to surfaces: their sex lives, their gym routines, and their quests for self-improvement. By parodying pornography or clichéd tropes from the 1980s and 1990s, none of the characters’ pursuits can be taken seriously. This corresponds to postmodernism’s propensity for surfaces, as described by Barry (85). Although the characters may be searching for a deeper meaning, they remain trapped

within a postmodern existence of surfaces. The characters that do claim to have access to a deeper meaning are represented in such a ridiculous way that it is difficult for the audience to take them seriously.

Secondly, the tension between meaninglessness and meaning is represented without resolution. The word “awesome” is at the same time reduced to nothingness and representative of the essence of life. The word becomes a contradiction in itself, simultaneously representing duplicitous ideas, as Hutcheon (1–2) suggests is characteristic of postmodernism. Although the characters are trapped in an existence of surfaces, in the case of language, these surfaces are also the essence of life.

Thirdly, Winterbach represents postmodernism’s final frontier, which according to McHale (261), is death, by relying on obsolete narratives from ancient Greek culture. The play therefore makes a point about the crisis of representation that postmodernism leaves us in. All that remains is existing narratives, or else to cease representation altogether.

Spyt therefore shows the audience a world where characters’ lives are known for their banality and superficiality. This banal superficiality is, however, also the essence of existence, and to escape from it, is to escape from the realm of representation altogether, and by implication from life itself. Postmodernism might, therefore, be out-dated and decaying, but in *Spyt*, the characters remain unable to be released from it.

Notes

1. *Karate Kallie* is the title of a slapstick Afrikaans film that was quite popular around the time that this play was written.

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